

A critical incident happened at your workplace

Traumatic events that cause stressful reactions are known as “critical incidents.” Common examples include community or natural disasters; serious injury or death of a coworker; workplace violence, suicide or homicide; and major organizational changes.

Even though the event that happened at your workplace is over, you may be experiencing unusually strong emotions that interfere with your ability to work effectively or function at home. It’s very common, and quite normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks following such a stressful ordeal. Sometimes these reactions are felt immediately; sometimes they appear hours, days, even weeks or months later.

Critical incident stress is often so traumatic that people need professional assistance from a counselor to cope with it. This is not a sign of weakness. It is normal and simply means that the event was just too powerful for you to handle by yourself.



Recognizing critical incident stress

Critical incidents may produce a wide range of symptoms that are unusual for you. Remember that these are **normal reactions to an abnormal situation**. The reactions are different for each person, but may affect:

How you think

- poor concentration
- lower attention span
- slowed problem solving
- memory problems
- difficulty making decisions

How you feel physically

- headaches
- chest or stomach pain
- muscle tremors
- difficulty breathing
- elevated blood pressure

How you feel emotionally

- depression
- grief or guilt
- anxiety or fear
- feeling lost or overwhelmed

How you behave

- excessive silence
- social withdrawal
- changes in sleep and eating habits
- lower work performance

What you can do for yourself

Remember that you’re normal and having normal reactions. Give yourself permission to feel bad.

- Get plenty of rest.
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals.
- Don’t “escape” with drugs or alcohol.
- Talk to people you trust, but don’t feel that you have to talk if you don’t want to.
- Realize that reoccurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal. They’ll decrease over time and become less painful.
- Hold off on making big decisions.
- Ask for help if you need it—either from your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or a support group.

What you can do for other people

- Take care of yourself first; only then will you be able to help others.
- Remember that your coworkers are under stress as well. Don’t take misdirected anger personally.
- Encourage people to talk about the experience.
- Listen and acknowledge their point of view, even if you don’t share it.
- Offer to help with everyday tasks, but also respect people’s need for privacy.
- Suggest available help, like your EAP or a support group.

Workplace Trauma

Dealing with critical incidents in the workplace

Returning to normal

It may take longer for some people than others, but things will return to normal over time.

- Completing daily tasks will become easier.
- Sleep and energy levels will improve.
- Feelings about the present and future will be more positive.
- The ability to enjoy life will return.

Things to remember about critical incidents

Critical incidents are usually sudden and unexpected. It's good to be prepared and know what to do in case a crisis situation happens again.

- Remain calm and get to safety.
- Be familiar with and practice emergency procedures.
- Avoid taking unnecessary risks.
- Alert emergency services when it is safe to do so.



Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

Your EAP benefit offers you and your family confidential assistance to help you deal with a wide range of personal, health or work-related issues. This free service helps you manage stress, overcome anxiety or depression, and cope with grief or loss.

Our EAP counselors are available anytime, every day. Simply call the toll-free EAP number provided by your human resources department.

we listen. we care. we help.

we are



confidential help anytime

